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The Evolution of American Public Diplomacy: Four Historical Insights

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1. The "Golden Age" Was Not Always So Golden

Contemporary public diplomacy (PD) is often measured against the standards of a mythical past punctuated by Cold War victory. In fact, America's PD was rebranded a success story only *after* the collapse of the Soviet Empire. Congressional hearings on the subject from the late 1980s—at the cusp of Cold War victory—reveal issues familiar to present-day PD practitioners: the challenge of measuring effectiveness, the impact of budgetary limitations, and the lamentation that PD was not well-integrated into the policymaking process. Congress raised questions about the responsiveness of Chiefs of Mission to PD priorities, the impact of terrorism on PD officers' ability to do outreach in the field, and the role of authoritarian governments in impeding U.S. programs. Throughout the Cold War, the PD apparatus was a regular target of reform studies, and its budgets were under constant scrutiny. Public diplomatists wrestled with the balance between unapologetic messaging and building two-way bridges through intercultural communication. The United States Information Agency (USIA) rarely had a "seat at the table" in policy deliberations. It was after all Edward R. Murrow, USIA's most famous director, who lamented that if PD was expected to be in on the crash landing it should also be in on the take-off. When Americans did pay attention to PD, it was often with over-inflated expectations. Many Americans--including Presidents and Congressmen--could not comprehend how information programs seemed incapable of blunting anti-Americanism abroad and building sympathy for U.S. policies.

2. Public Diplomacy Is Still in Its Adolescent Stage in the State Department

Integrating PD and traditional diplomacy after the 1999 merger of USIA and the Department of State required changing a bureaucratic culture, establishing a new professional cone in the Foreign Service, and rebuilding capabilities decimated by post-Cold War budget cuts. Fourteen years is an eternity in a world of 24-hour news cycles, but brief in the history of the oldest cabinet agency. Halting progress has been made on nearly all fronts. For instance, the establishment of PD Deputy Assistant Secretaries in the Regional Bureaus--first proposed during the merger--did not come to fruition for more than a decade. Culture shifts can be slower than structural change. PD leaders consistently stressed the importance of embracing bold public engagement strategies and overcoming the risk-averse, closed-door diplomatic mentality of the

"old" State Department. Nevertheless, the risk/reward calculus of PD as practiced had to be constantly tested against the conception and tradition. Technologically, the Department moved from a position of semi-literacy to embrace tech-friendly engagement strategies for disseminating messages and creating new opportunities for reaching younger, more diverse audiences, and countering hostile messages. The full integration is still unfinished, but, substantial change can be overlooked in the maelstrom of daily crises and the slog of bureaucratic inefficiency.

3. Whole-of-Government Public Diplomacy Efforts Left a Trail of Forgotten Acronyms and Aborted Strategies

Reorganizations and new "strategic" approaches defined interagency approaches to PD. Well before 9/11, officials tried to integrate the disparate civilian and military elements involved in information policy. After the terrorist attacks, they again tried to fashion an interagency strategy and coordinate a "strategic approach" to the "War of Ideas." Strategically, the PD-lead oscillated. Early in the Bush administration, the White House coordinated overall policy, while the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs led the "State piece". The President then shifted responsibility to Foggy Bottom. In 2009 the interagency lead reverted back to the White House. Post-9/11 perceptions of threat complicated coordination. The military massively expanded its role in strategic communications as battlefields blurred. This produced debates about the definition of PD, and civilian concern that PD was becoming "militarized" and must be "rebalanced." Operationally, there was constant tension between the State Department asserting itself as the lead agency and the perception that it was unable to act commensurately. Interagency success stories, such as the creation of the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications were small-scale, requiring policy-level leadership and the bypass of existing entities. More frequently, a pattern of frustration emerged. An alphabet soup of working groups and committees analyzed challenges, drafted strategies, and then disappeared. At each stage, PD leaders believed they had created effective structures and strategies. Their successors, in turn, bemoaned what they regarded as frail structures and the absence of strategy.

4. Public Diplomacy and Traditional Diplomacy Are Converging

The United States has slowly embraced the decentralization of diplomacy blurring the distinction between public diplomacy and traditional diplomacy. Developments ranging from terrorism to popular uprisings to technological revolution have demonstrated that threats and opportunities emerge from within states and below state institutions as much as between states. Reaching new audiences in new locales outside of traditional power centers became a strategic imperative. Traditional diplomacy adjusted by moving beyond reporting and analysis and relationships with governments in host nation capitals. Public Diplomacy expanded beyond policy advocacy and explaining American values. Overall, U.S. foreign policy prioritized helping strengthen government institutions, support democratic movements and foster civil society. The process of convergence has been evolutionary. Secretary Powell grasped the power of the information revolution, reallocated positions and resources from traditional diplomatic posting to new areas and recognized the power of satellite television to move publics and constrain governments even in authoritarian regimes. Secretary Rice forwarded this reconceptualization under the rubric of "Transformational Diplomacy," which sought to help people transform their own lives and the

relationship between state and society. Secretary Clinton continued the theme under the concept of "Smart Power." "Person-to-person diplomacy in today's work is as important as what we do in official meetings in national capitals across the globe," Clinton said in 2010.The work done by PD officials in Arab Spring countries beginning in 2011 was as much about capacity-building as advocating U.S. policies or directly trying to explain American culture. By 2012, the National Framework for Strategic Communication defined PD as a "critical lever" of U.S. efforts to facilitate democratic transitions and foster economic opportunities within and across societies. Technological factors made the decentralization of diplomacy possible and expanded PD tools. However, the center of gravity of U.S. foreign policy has shifted toward public diplomacy for a more fundamental reason: the core goal of public diplomacy is inseparable from the core American objectives of promoting and defending the free flow of goods, ideas, and people.